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# THE BIBLICAL WORLD

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VOLUME XXXI

MAY, 1908

NUMBER 5

## Editorial

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### THE WILL TO BELIEVE AND THE WILL TO DOUBT

#### THE CHOICE BETWEEN BELIEVING AND DOUBTING

Professor Lloyd of the University of Michigan has recently published a book entitled *The Will to Doubt*. The title reminds us of the famous essay of Professor William James, entitled, "The Will to Believe." The two titles bring forcibly before the mind one of the questions with which every thoughtful man has more or less constantly to grapple, Shall I believe, or shall I doubt, and what is the criterion by which I can determine which is wise and rational in a given case? Modern psychology has made it more clear to the minds of men than it once was, that believing, disbelieving, and doubting are not results that flow inevitably from the facts as presented to the mind, still less as existing objectively, but that into each such result there enters, in the great majority of cases, an element of decision akin to that by which one chooses one's road to a destination, one's home, or one's friends. It has not been made quite so clear what is the ethics of the situation. It is easy to say that one ought always to decide according to the facts. But in a multitude of cases one must decide with a very imperfect knowledge of the facts. The possibilities moreover are not simply to believe or to disbelieve; one may choose to doubt, i. e., to suspend judgment pending an investigation. Of course I must believe that two and two make four. Of course I must disbelieve that two and two make five. But shall I believe that a man at my door is telling the truth about his sick wife and child, or shall I doubt? Shall I believe that my friend's advice about an investment is good, or shall I be skeptical and cautious? It is no small part of the wisdom of life to know when to believe, when to disbelieve, and when to doubt.

## A VITAL QUESTION IN RELIGION

It is not alone in the field of morals and religion therefore that one must exercise the *will* to believe or to doubt; but nowhere is the question more vital and pressing; and precisely for this reason, that, unless it be in aesthetics, nowhere are we further removed from the mathematical certainties of arithmetic and geometry. Nowhere does character exert so much influence in determining our judgments; nowhere is decision so influential in determining character. Excess of readiness to believe issues in credulous superstition, a narrowing of sympathy, and a general belittling of life. Excessive reluctance to believe, a disposition to accept only those things that can be verified by the senses, tends to impoverish life by excluding the invisible and the spiritual, narrowing it to the material and the tangible.

## AN IMPORTANT QUESTION IN BIBLICAL STUDY

In the realm of biblical study the problem has its own peculiar difficulty. Questions of history, questions of literary criticism, questions of archaeology, are mingled almost inextricably with questions of morals and religion. Can one hold fast to his religion while he is skeptical in reference to those matters of history which have hitherto been intimately associated with his religion? Can he retain undiminished his faith in Christ while he debates the question of the historicity of the gospel record? Can he even question the Davidic authorship of the fifty-first psalm, and still derive from it the same help and profit it gave him when he read it as portraying the personal experience of Israel's king? Must one then choose between a dogmatic treatment of history and a skeptical attitude toward religion? Certainly many have so chosen and are choosing today, with the result that some will to believe in the sphere of history, not what the evidence proves, but those things which they have tied up in the bundle with their religious convictions, and others will to doubt in the realm of religion because they see the necessity of unprejudiced investigation in the realm of history.

## A MIDDLE COURSE NECESSARY

But neither of these solutions of the problem is satisfactory; nor is the division into opposing camps that arises from the adoption of the different solutions a situation to be desired. What is needed is some

*via media*, which shall give due place to religious faith and due justice to that spirit of open-minded doubt without which scholarship is impossible. Such a *via media* we believe it is possible to find.

In the first place it must be recognized that knowledge is not the supreme consideration in life. Knowledge is valuable and better than error or ignorance. But after all, it is only a means to an end, and only one of the many things that contribute to make life worth the living. It is possible to buy knowledge too dearly, devoting to its acquisition time and energy that might be spent in enriching life more effectively. The mother that neglects her home and children to solve the Homeric question, the pastor who neglects the call of the needy in his congregation to solve the problems of lexicography or of literary criticism, has not necessarily chosen wisely. Nor does he judge rightly of the values of life who in his zeal to set his friend right on some matter of biblical history or literature at the same time sets him wrong on those profounder and more important matters which to many minds are inextricably interwoven with questions of history and literary theory. It is better after all to be ignorant or mistaken on many matters of fact than to be set right at so great a cost of things more valuable than knowledge. Knowledge purchased with doubt that destroys not alone confidence in long-cherished opinions in matters of fact, but the faith that glorifies life, might better never have been bought.

But this is not to say that there is no place in life for scientific doubt. On the contrary, faith and doubt both have their rights, because both are needful to human welfare. Man needs religion and he needs science, and he cannot have religion without faith, or science without doubt. Religion and science, faith and doubt are not enemies; they are complementary; not so different as light and darkness, but as necessary to life as the darkness of the night and the brightness of the sun. And no life is quite normal in which either element is lacking.

But this is not the whole truth. Faith does not belong wholly to religion or doubt wholly to science. In no sphere can we dispense entirely with either faith or doubt. The man of science must believe that the normal processes of his mind are trustworthy and that there are other minds than his own. And religion unchallenged by reasonable doubt tends to become irrational, superstitious, or tyrannical.

It is a question of proportion, not a matter of mutual exclusion. Having performed in the sphere of science the primary act of faith, we may thereafter, in proportion as the things with which we are dealing are tangible and material, give scope to the challenge of doubt and the demand for definite evidence. As we rise into the sphere of the intangible and invisible, but supremely valuable things of life, into the sphere of friendship, art, religion, we must, if we would not impoverish our lives, make the venture of faith, and will to believe, for the richness and beauty of life are dependent on the exercise of faith. Here it is as rational to will to believe as in other spheres it is to will to doubt.

Moreover it is not only in different planes or spheres that the proportion of the two, faith and doubt, must vary. It is natural and right that they should differ in different lives and in different periods of the same life. The little child is all faith; for him doubt would be abnormal, unhealthy, monstrous. The grown man learns to doubt: in business, in politics, in religion, in science; yet no two men exactly in the same way or in reference to the same things. One man studies religion, and faces with open mind questions that his friend never raises. Another studies politics and becomes an expert doubter and investigator. One man exercises doubt vicariously for a whole community and as a consequence its faith is gradually made deeper and more intelligent. But no man wholly escapes the need to doubt except by remaining all his life a child in mind, and no man becomes so mature as to outgrow the need of faith, or indeed the necessity of willing to believe. We mingle our doubt and faith in ever-varying proportion, and each for himself; but to the end we are all creatures evenly of doubt and of faith, or live impoverished lives.

The appeal of the situation is therefore to the man of faith and the man of science to join hands in the effort to deepen and enrich life. Let the man of faith not only recognize the legitimacy of science, but in his measure himself become a man of science. Let the man of science both recognize the need of faith, and himself exercise faith. For science is legitimate and needful, and faith is a necessity not only to some men but to all men.